

## “I’ll Take Blood Sucking Moths for Fifty”: Trusting the Ancients on Animal Lore

It is customary to treat outrageous claims from antiquity concerning animals with a judicious shake of the head and an immediate recourse to a belief that authors such as Pliny were so indiscriminating that they would believe, and report, anything. Even a casual reader of Pliny the Elder has had this reaction numerous times. Yet the author, currently preparing a book on animals in antiquity, has found cause to temper this reaction with a certain amount of caution. The ancient writers on animals should not be rejected out of hand, for they often are more correct than we would care to acknowledge.

Nicander (*Theriaca* 759-68) describes a creature which seems to be a large moth with the ability to sting or bite. The name is given by the scholia and seems to mean "head-biter." The scholia also offer a synonym, "head striker." The animal is clearly a moth, as it flutters indoors at night around lamps and has scaly wings that leave a residue of dust on anyone touching it. Up to this point Nicander is on safe ground. But he continues to tell us of its hard, nodding head and that it is lethal when it stings a man on the head or neck. It lives among the "trees of Perseus" in Egypt. The scholiasts add that this "moth" has four wings (as moths do) and a stinger that is positioned below its head, hidden by its neck. Philoumenos (15.5 = Aetius 13.20) states that the "moth" is green, but Beavis (53) explains this as a misreading of Nicander. Dioscorides (DMM 1.187) lists them and their connection with the Persea tree. Pliny (*HN* 28.45.116) tells of a moth (*papilio*) that flutters around lamps is numbered among *mala medicamenta*. That is, it is venomous.

One’s first reaction is clear – moths do not bite. Yet several genera are in fact equipped with a noticeable proboscis and the males of some ten species, e.g. *Calyptra thalictri*, which is found from southern Europe to Turkey and points east, suck juice from fruit and, as recent

expeditions have demonstrated, will suck blood as well (Zaspel et al. 2011, 206). Others suck tears (lachrymophagy). Thus, Nicander's report is plausible.

Pliny (*HN* 8.78.213) describes an Indian pig: "In India their tusks are curved and a cubit long, a pair comes up from the jaw and the same number from the forehead like the horns of a calf." This actually is a decent description of the babirusa (*Babyrousa babyrussa*), found on the Indonesian island of Sulawesi (formerly Celebese) and neighboring islands. This member of the pig family presents a most startling sight, as it has tusks which grow up through the top of its muzzle and curve back toward its head (Powell 276 with illustration; 287). Clearly mention of the animal filtered into India and thence West.

Aelian (*NA* 16.6) describes the Indian *phattagēs* as an animal somewhat like the "land crocodile." He gives its size as that of a small Melitean dog and says its scales are so sharp that they can be used as a file. It can cut through bronze and eat its way through bronze. In fact, this is a fairly good, if slightly exaggerated, description of the pangolin (*Manis crassicaudata*).

Finally, the true identification of the two-headed snake called the amphisbaena will be revealed.

Similar findings occur in cases of reports of animal behavior. The paper will show the factual behaviors that lie behind such stories as beavers castrating themselves to avoid capture, hippos bleeding themselves, and the improbable claim that bees take on ballast in high winds as ships do at sea.

In conclusion the paper will argue that one's first instinct upon reading a fantastic bit of animal lore should not be "There goes Pliny again!" but rather, "I wonder what lies behind that tale?"

Slides will be shown of all the animals mentioned in the talk.

## Works Cited

Beavis, Ian. *Insects and Other Invertebrates in Classical Antiquity*. Exeter: 1981.

Powell, David. "Pigs (Suidae)," in *Grzimek's Animal Life Encyclopedia*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Vol. 15, 275-90.  
Detroit: Gale, 2004.

Zaspel, J.M. "Another Blood Feeder? Experimental Feeding of a Fruit-Piercing Moth Species on Human Blood, in the Primorye Territory of Far Eastern Russia. (*Lepidoptera: Noctuidae: Calpinae*)," *Journal of Insect Behavior* 20(2007), 437–51.